

Tackling terror by human intelligence



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In the space of 3 days London suffered four horrific bombings, and then celebrated six decades since the end of World War II. The British are good at pulling together when there's a crisis. 'Our mothers hid under the kitchen table every night for two years under the bombings of the Battle of Britain, never knowing whether they would come out alive. This kind of experience generated what in Britain we call 'World War Two Spirit' and, even for younger generations born since the 1940s, this spirit is still alive. This is why we're good at rock festivals, the death of princesses, general strikes and engagement in wars - we're a warrior nation that tackles hardship full-on'¹.

¹ Palden Jenkins, The London Bombings, 10.7.05.

But with the bombings of July 7th we are faced with a different kind of threat. We know from years of experience in N.Ireland – bloody for everyone - that if terrorism is approached as war, it is a war that cannot be won. If terror could be dealt with by using superior force, the mightiest military machine in history would surely have prevailed in Iraq by now.

What is needed instead is intelligence: intelligence of the obvious kind – tracking people down, stopping flows of money, cutting supplies of weapons and explosives – and intelligence of a less obvious kind - intelligence that understands the mind of the extremist. A reaction that simply asserts ‘these people only understand force’ or ‘these people are psychopaths’ doesn’t help very much. What is potentially more useful, and much more difficult, is to understand why people are furious enough to commit extreme acts of political violence, often involving their own deaths.

In the mind of the extremist

Terrorism is a calculated act of political violence, premeditated with the intention of creating the maximum public disruption and response. The ultimate aim is psychological violence; to create an environment in which people no longer feel safe. The intelligent response is also, in turn, psychological.

So, what might it feel like to be Osama Bin Laden, or any militant Islamic fundamentalist? It might look like this. “The attractiveness of popular Western culture - largely American culture - is overwhelming. It spurts images and possibilities of fulfilled individual desire (the pursuit of happiness in high consumption environments) and is profoundly corrosive of other societies. It may not entirely dissolve but it certainly modifies them...spiritual pollution squirts in faster and faster over satellites and cables, like a long term toxic attack.”²

Such an experience of western culture, which is quite commonly expressed all over the Middle East, can produce a seething hostility and aggressive, disgusted reactions. Add to this the humiliation felt by Palestinians, Afghanis and now Iraqis as they are forced to submit to roadblocks, strip searches, curfews and their homes being raided. The theme of humiliation recurs throughout reports and opinion surveys. A poll sponsored by *ABC News* in March 2004 found that 41 percent of Iraqis thought the war had humiliated Iraq.

What may be isolated incidents - the act of scrawling an obscene insult "Fuck Iraq and every Iraqi in it!" on a bedroom mirror during a house raid - may not seem like much, but a single act of this sort can affirm nationalist tendencies in

² ‘Motives and methods of future political violence’ by Paul Schulte in *Hype or Reality? The New Terrorism and Mass Casualty Attacks* ed. Brad Roberts, The Chemical and Biological Arms Control Institute, Alexandria, Virginia 2000.

an entire neighbourhood and colour its perception of the American mission.³ The Economist reports another example where Marines in Ramadi, searching for insurgents, randomly kicked in the doors of houses to shout at the women inside: "'Where's your black mask?' and 'Bitch, where's the guns?'"⁴ These soldiers were not taught in advance that some cultural taboos are not to be violated, for example that in Iraq a man's honour will be terminally abused (and require retaliation) if his wife is seen by soldiers in her nightdress.

Humiliation and degradation are ancient and explosive weapons of war, and inevitably produce a backlash. In cultures where the concept of honour is profound, those who humiliate and de-humanise do so at their peril. And now, at ours.

In Iraq, the sense of powerlessness for ordinary people under Saddam Hussein has been compounded by the humiliation of the invasion and the failures of reconstruction. Alistair Crooke, intelligence officer and former EU security adviser, directly experienced the US assault on Falluja. "If you haven't experienced it you can have no idea what it feels like being subjected to bombing of this kind", he says. "The houses which were destroyed had nothing to do with the resistance fighters, who slept in alleyways. And, because bombs were attached to doorbells, the US troops killed the first person they saw as a matter of course. This kind of trauma generates intense hostility," says Crooke. "Even if you are an observer, you can't trust your emotions."⁵

There is a direct link between the humiliation and trauma of occupation, and political violence. In an atmosphere of chaos and humiliation, fundamentalism offers a firm philosophy which can give the impression of certainty in an uncertain world. For those suffering the indignities of occupation with the sense of helplessness, to identify with strict codes of practice can offer emotional relief.

Imagine the impact for some young Muslim men, exposed to satellite images on their television screens of the ravages of Fallujah, now a ghost city where 700 of its inhabitants were killed, which some now describe as their "Guernica". They have emulated the violence that has been inflicted on those with whom they identify, and have chosen to use the same violent methods themselves.

Cycles of violence

Individual people, as well as communities or nations, get caught up in deadly cycles of violence. These cycles are deadly because they ensure that one conflict leads straight into another, often involving more and more killing. The classic cycle of violence has roughly seven stages and the diagram below shows how it works in the human psyche, at the level of emotions. If terrorism is to be prevented, it is at a human level that it

³ Quoting from Ali Fadhil, "City of Ghosts," *The Guardian (UK)*, 11 January 2005.

⁴ "When deadly force bumps into hearts and minds," *Economist*, 1 January 2005.

⁵ Personal communication, 16 February 2005.

must operate, because the origins of the cycle can only be dismantled within the individual human mind and heart.

The cycle of violence



Intervention is needed at the point before anger hardens into bitterness, revenge and retaliation. To be effective it must address the physical, the political and the

Point of intervention



psychological security of people trapped in violence; all are equally important, and one without the other is insufficiently strong to break the cycle.

That is why strategies for reducing terror must address the physical, psychological and political dimensions of security simultaneously, and seek to combine political negotiation and formal agreements with changes that are evident much closer to everyday life.

So what is to be done?

Avoid, wherever possible, using more violence. Nothing should be done that supports the image of the terrorist as a heroic warrior defending the interests of the people. Incidents like Abu Ghraib, the killing of innocent civilians in Fallujah and tank shells fired into the Gaza strip, make it easier for militants to claim convincingly that their campaign of violence, repugnant to so many outside, is legitimate amongst their own.

The main reason for the failure of the Islamic revolution in Algeria and Egypt was that most people wanted to have nothing to do with men who mutilated and maimed innocent people. In the global context that holds true too. It is the moderation and humanity of the vast population of the world of 1.3 billion Muslims - and their reaction to acts like the beheading of Johnson - that will see us through the darkness that lies ahead and take us toward an end to both terror and the war on it.⁶

Our society has to be sophisticated enough to resist *engrenage*, the military word for tit-for-tat spirals which might involve inflicting significant casualties on populations with whom the terrorists identify. This is a trap laid by the politically violent, into which the US (and to an extent the UK) has fallen in Iraq.

Show respect. Throughout our research, humiliation has been identified as a key driver of political violence. Conversely, to redress and reduce violence requires systematic training for soldiers and all those involved in conflict, in the necessity for respect for other cultures. This means, for the training of all police and armed forces, not only knowledge of customs and religious sensitivities, but also education in awareness – understanding why respect is so important.

Political leaders could demonstrate this by making a deliberate ‘public space’ in our own society to honour the culture and norms of Islam, to celebrate and support those whose interpretations of the Koran are peaceable, to offer them a megaphone. If such a public space were extended worldwide, it could cut across religious and cultural boundaries and decisively undermine the cells of terror.

The concept is easy to grasp at the personal level: if someone feels deeply insulted by another, he is hardly likely to behave in a peaceful and co-operative way. Whereas, even if there is profound disagreement, if the other speaks in a respectful non-aggressive manner, differences can often be sorted out. What is effective between two people is also effective with groups and between nations. The personal is indeed political.

At key moments, respect can save lives in ways that guns cannot. The US officer who ordered his men to ‘take a knee’ in an explosive encounter with enraged civilians in Fallujah, was using not only his initiative but his understanding of the need for respect. Great courage is needed to defuse violent situations in this way.

Deep listening. When large numbers of people have endured horror, it becomes important to create space in which they can humanise their relationships and move beyond demonising the other. This obviously applies to the victims of the London bombings, but it also applies to community and religious leaders who will want to do whatever they can to ensure that the violent are isolated and undermined. Initiatives within local communities to discuss the attacks should be actively supported and

⁶ J. Burke, “The Arab Backlash the Militants Did Not Expect”, *The Observer*, 20 June 2004.

professionally facilitated. This was done with spectacular success in South Africa, and has been a key factor in decreasing violence in N.Ireland.

Involve civil society. Over ten civilians are killed for every combatant in modern wars; the same is true for the effects of political violence. Civilians and civil society therefore have a central role in minimizing political violence. Some of their most effective methods look to ancient (and very modern) traditions of non-violence.

The power of change in the human heart is formidable. It is what can transform violent activists into statesmen. The development undergone by Nelson Mandela during his years on Robben Island, after he was convicted of terrorism, made it possible for him to emerge from jail unshakably committed to negotiation and reconciliation. Had it not been for the depth of his and his colleagues' conviction, there were enough people on both sides ready to have plunged South Africa into a civil war which could have cost millions of lives.

In Iraq and Afghanistan methods such as those described would undoubtedly have taken longer to effect the removal of the regime, and would have posed plenty of difficulties. But they would have resulted in few civilian or military casualties, little physical destruction, and none of the current bitterness and hatred for the occupying forces. Non-military support for progress to a multi-party state could eventually have produced an Iraqi opposition capable of government, as has happened in South Africa, the Philippines, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, East Timor and so on. By keeping to the principle of enabling a people to decide its own future, rather than imposing military rule, the current level of anger and resentment towards the US and UK - with all the latent contribution to terrorism - would have been avoided.

Involve women. Terror networks typically include few women, and women can play a key role in defusing or undermining the politically violent, suggesting and arranging more effective methods of bringing about change. In development work worldwide it is now commonly accepted that women are effective agents of change, with striking examples of successful peace-building by women in Kenya, Somalia, India, Colombia, Afghanistan, South Africa, Croatia and Serbia.

The United States

None of the above are methods of which George Bush would approve. But his methods have not worked. Afghanistan has an unstable government, most of the country off-limits to aid workers and a resurgent Taliban, better equipped and funded than ever before, mounting a campaign of bombings and killings; heroin cultivation now accounts for 60% of Afghanistan's economy. Iraq is freely acknowledged in Whitehall to be a disaster, which many fear will descend into civil war.

All this could get much worse. Insurgents in Baghdad or Kabul or Washington or London could use chemical weapons, water supplies could be fatally polluted, and we are utterly defenceless against biological attacks. Before this happens, and to prevent this happening, we need a public debate about whether it would

be wiser to de-couple from our dangerous ally. Bush appears impervious to Blair's persuasions, and the British public need to debate whether time is up for his tactics. Britain, especially during its presidency of the G8 and the EU, has a chance to work with the rest of the world using methods that do stand a chance of undermining terror.

Scilla Elworthy is co-author with Gabrielle Rifkind of 'Heart and Minds: human security approaches to political violence' published by Demos on 21st July.

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